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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000185

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM MOPS TH

SUBJECT: NORTHERN VILLAGERS EXPECT RTG TO TRY TO LIMIT PPP SUCCESS

REF: CHIANG MAI 182 (THAKSIN LOYALISTS POISED TO RECAPTURE NORTH)

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

¶11. (C) While candidates prepare their campaigns in the run-up to the December 23 election, government officials are gearing up to closely monitor political activity in northern Thailand, a stronghold for the former Thai Rak Thai party. Politicians, academics, and village leaders across the north expect that local representatives of the Ministry of Interior, the Election Commission of Thailand, and the military will strictly manage this election, keeping the People's Power Party (PPP), in particular, under the microscope. Despite efforts to tackle vote-buying, officials expect candidates' spending for votes to increase this December, while villagers argue that personal connections to candidates will be the primary motivation for voters. Though voter support for the new constitution was divided in the region, one opinion rings true across the northern provinces: the military government's main objective is to prevent a PPP victory. End Summary.

MISSION: FREE AND FAIR ELECTION; TARGET: "THOSE TRT BASTARDS"

¶12. (C) Though hoping for a free and fair election on December 23, village leaders and political analysts across Thailand's north believe the Ministry of Interior (MOI), Election Commission of Thailand (ECT), and the military will use various means to prevent the People's Power Party (PPP) from being in a position to head the new civilian government. The PPP is campaigning as the true successor to ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's now-banned Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party. In a recent trip across the upper and lower north of Thailand, local officials told EconOff and EconLES that the MOI and ECT - with help from the military - are preparing to crack down on vote-buying and other illegal campaigning methods. Despite their best efforts, however, analysts believe the parties will have to spend even more for votes this year than in years past.

¶13. (C) Our contacts told us that they expect the military government will target the PPP in its enforcement of campaign regulations, many of which are new. Association of Kamnan (local government leaders) and Village Heads of Northern Thailand President Inwan Bangnuen said that to make the PPP lose, the government must stop vote-buying. "Those Thai Rak Thai bastards" bought their victories in previous elections, he

said, so either the government will have to crack down on vote-buying or other parties will have to pay more. Inwan asserted that the government and the military would try to block a PPP victory. He said that the Kamnan of the 17 northern provinces would be meeting soon with Deputy Prime Minister General (ret) Sonthi Boonyaratglin, but could not say what the meeting would be about (Comment: We expect Sonthi to use the meeting to advise the Kamnan on strategies to limit public support for the PPP).

¶4. (C) Chiang Rai PPP candidate Ittidet Kaewlaung said, "The military plays politics itself now and will be the real players in this election." He said that the military conducts meetings with villagers and monitors movements of PPP candidates. Villagers reported the presence of military personnel in the provinces we visited (Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Sukhothai, and Kamphaengphet), but did not report any action by them. As for the ECT, Ittidet said that it has grown too powerful and has expanded constituencies as a means of reshuffling and, therefore, weakening the TRT/PPP base. He also said that the ECT's new regulations give unfair preference to small parties in order to bar large parties (read, PPP) from winning seats.

FAMILIAR FACES AND MONEY BRING VOTERS TO THE BOOTH

¶5. (C) Village leaders across the north agree that the primary factor for voters' picks in the election will be the familiarity of the candidates. Chiang Rai Rajabhat University lecturer Udorn Wongtumtip said personal connections with party candidates will determine how voters make their choice. In Chiang Rai, because most of these familiar faces are PPP members, analysts expect at least five of the province's eight MP seats to go to PPP members. Many expect the PPP to win all eight seats (as TRT did in the 2005 and 2001 elections). Conversely, in Sukhothai -- swept by TRT candidates in the last two elections -- village leaders predict all four seats will go to the Matchima Thippatai party because the former TRT members have switched

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allegiance to that party and are expected to carry their voters with them.

¶6. (C) Aside from personal connections, vote-buying will be another motivation for voters this December. The PPP's Ittidet said that with reshuffled constituencies, vote-buying will intensify with competing parties such as Chart Thai having to front more money than in prior elections. Kamphaengphet ECT member Somchai Ponjhon estimated that each candidate would need to spend 40-50 million Thai baht (approximately 1.3 million USD) for a chance to win. In previous elections, candidates spent an estimated 14-15 million baht (approximately 440,000 USD). Somchai also expects the methods of vote-buying to be more discrete this time since the parties will be under close watch by the government. For example, parties are considering using cell phone credit as a substitute for cash, he said.

IN THE UPPER NORTH, A VOTE FOR PPP IS A VOTE FOR THAKSIN

¶7. (SBU) The eight provinces of Thailand's "Upper North" continue to be a major stronghold for the pro-Thaksin camp. Village leaders in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces said that Upper North voters remain loyal to the former TRT MPs and will support them under whatever party banner they choose, in this case the PPP. Villagers from these provinces have fond memories of the Thaksin administration, emphasizing that under Thaksin their rural regions were given unprecedented attention and money from the central government in Bangkok. One village leader told us, "In the past, villagers had to wait for services from government officials; but during the Thaksin government, for the first time, government officials were serving villagers."

IN THE LOWER NORTH, THAKSIN'S LEGACY LESS STRONG

18. (SBU) In the lower northern provinces of Sukhothai and Kamphaengphet, villagers praised Thaksin, the TRT, and their policy achievements; however, they said his popularity in their villages will not always translate into electoral support for the PPP. In Sukhothai, former TRT MPs have jumped ship to Matchima Thippathai (per para 5 above). In Kamphaengphet, most MP seats are expected to go to the PPP because of the former TRT candidates who are running; however, one candidate who is running with the Democrat Party is expected to gain a seat because of his personal relationships in the province. (Comment: We also note that all nine "Lower North" provinces supported the RTG-backed draft constitution in the August 19 referendum. In contrast, seven of the eight "Upper North" provinces rejected it).

COMMENT

19. (C) Across northern Thailand, villagers, PPP candidates, and even government officials admit that the objective of the military in this election is to limit PPP success and prevent it from heading the next government. We expect that political parties, the media, and NGOs observing the election will be watching for signs of military interference in the electoral process. We will continue to work with these actors to monitor any possible interference during the campaigns and election. Nonetheless, most observers still believe the PPP will dominate the northern region as TRT did in the last two elections (see Reftel). Although personal connections and vote-buying may alter the voting patterns of locals on December 23, support for Thaksin and his populist policies has not dwindled up north.

MORROW